

Child Fatality Review #08-14
Region 4
King County

This three-month-old African American male's death was attributed to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Case Overview

On April 5, 2008, the King County Medical Examiner reported to Children's Administration intake that the deceased child's mother was co-sleeping with her twins (one of the twins is the deceased child) in her bed. She reported she woke four times during the night to feed them. When she woke in the morning, she noticed the deceased child had mucus and blood coming from his nose and mouth. The medical examiner reported this is common with SIDS fatalities. The mother tried to clear the area with a small pump but the child was already deceased.

In 2007, another infant died in the mother's care. The mother's four-month-old daughter died from injuries from being shaken by her birth father. He did not live in the family home and fatally injured this child during a scheduled visit. The father was charged with Murder. There was no evidence the mother was aware of the injuries to this child.

Referral History

On May 31, 2007, the King County Medical Examiner reported to Children's Administration intake the death of a four-month-old female child in the mother's home. This child would be the sister to the deceased child. The initial cause of death was suspicious and the Medical Examiner's office investigated this fatality. This sibling died from a skull fracture with bleeding on the brain. The police were notified and two other older siblings, ages five-years-old and 16-months-old, were placed in protective custody. The child's father admitted to shaking the child and was charged with Murder. Dependency petitions were filed on the two surviving siblings and they remained in relative care. By March 14, 2008, the mother had complied with all services and court orders, and there had been no new referrals to Child Protective Services (CPS). A Child Protection Team (CPT) recommended the dependency be dismissed; the dependency was dismissed on March 24, 2008 and the CA case was closed on March 27, 2008. The CPS case was closed with a founded finding as to the father and an inconclusive finding as to the mother.

On April 5, 2008, the King County Medical Examiner reported to Children's Administration intake the death of the deceased child died from unknown causes. The mother told law enforcement that she woke and found the deceased child's nose plugged (he had a cold) and attempted to clear the nostrils of mucus with a small pump. The Medical Examiner reported the baby was already dead at that time. The referral was screened in for investigation by CPS and closed with an inconclusive finding. According to the autopsy report, the cause of death was SIDS. There were no signs of physical trauma.

Issues and Recommendations

Issue: The risk factor of co-sleeping with premature twins on an adult bed, with soft objects present. There was no documentation that the mother had received safe sleep instruction when the twins were born. The surviving twin was apparently on or near a pillow when his mother awoke.

Recommendation: Health care providers and Children's Administration should consider strategies for emphasizing a safe sleep environment.

Issue: Coordination of investigations with law enforcement. The social workers had difficulty engaging the same police department in both investigations, in the first case, causing a delay in contact with the children and the caregivers; in the second case, coordinating the need for physical exams to rule out child maltreatment.

Recommendation: The recent revision to the King County Special Assault Network Protocol, addressing serious physical abuse, helps to clarify each agency's role.